

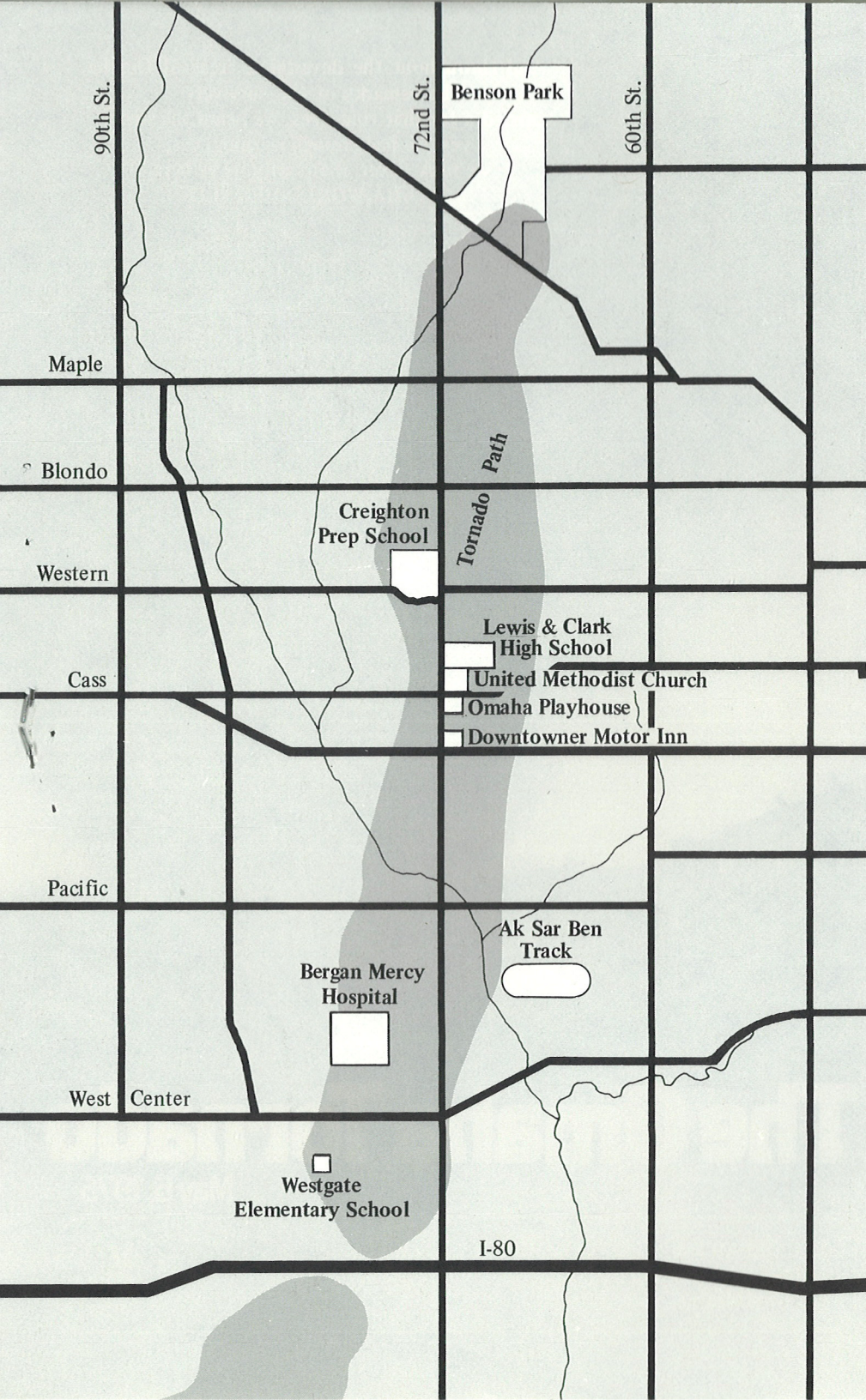
"And throughout the devastated areas of Omaha,  
the remarks of the survivors  
carried a familiar ring, 'yes, we heard the sirens;  
yes, we had enough warning; yes,  
we took cover; that's why we're here.'"  
OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

# The Omaha Tornado

May 6, 1975

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
National Weather Service





Nebraska gets its share of wind storms, but the heart of "tornado alley" is somewhat to the east and south. Cornhuskers might be forgiven a certain complacency when it comes to twisters, especially city dwellers. After all, the state's last big killer tornado was back in 1953 when 11 people were killed in rural Valley County. Nebraska's worst storm, from the standpoint of deaths, to be sure, was a tornado which struck Omaha in 1913 killing 100, injuring 300 others, and destroying 1,800 homes. But that was over 60 years ago, and there aren't many people still living in Omaha now who remember that one.

So when the National Weather Service issued a tornado watch for the Omaha area shortly after noon on May 6, 1975, one might expect the apathy that most big cities are noted for. But there was no complacency in Omaha that day. The people were alert — watching — waiting.

At 4:29 p.m. that Tuesday afternoon, a tornado roared into the southwest corner of the city, took a northeast path through homes, apartments, an industrial area, across Interstate 80, into the crowded business areas, and lifted on the north side of the city in Benson Park at about 4:58 p.m. It was 600 yards wide, packed 150-200 mile-an-hour winds, and traveled about nine miles on the ground. City officials estimate 31,000 people lived or worked in the 2,000 block area that caught the full fury of the storm. The Bergan Mercy Hospital, the Downtowner Motor Inn, Temple Israel, the First United Methodist Church, the Omaha Play-

house, high and low cost houses, a huge 848-unit apartment development, restaurants, night clubs, motels, a bank, and many small businesses all took direct hits. When it was all over, there were three dead, about 200 injured, and more than 2,000 homes or apartments destroyed or damaged.

That only three people lost their lives seemed incredible. The Omaha World-Herald headlined: "IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE, BUT TORNADO ALERT WORKED." Officials who surveyed the wreckage estimated that the death toll could have been anywhere from 300 to 500 or higher. They credited the low loss of life to the early warnings sounded by Civil Defense sirens and the warnings issued over radio and TV. According to Jim Zoller, Meteorologist in Charge of the National Weather Service's Forecast Office in Omaha, "From noon on, radio and television stations reported everything we gave them, broadcast everything completely and quickly." He also paid tribute to the newspapers "who have done so much in educating the public on what to do in severe weather. When alarms sounded, people knew what to do and did it."

What did people do? Who was responsible for Omaha's effective reaction to the approaching storm?



*Omaha's Public Safety Department, Communications Division Center, during the storm. The decision was made here to activate the city's siren system.  
(Photo: Jim Denney-Omaha World-Herald)*

Luck played a role, but so did people. Thousands of people heard the Civil Defense sirens, and the broadcasts, and huddled in basements and under tables. "As a result," said Mayor Edward Zorinsky of Omaha, "what might have been a high death toll was prevented."

Westgate Elementary School was destroyed and the Lewis and Clark Junior High School was damaged extensively. An hour and a half earlier and hundreds of students would have been in those schools. The pupils who stayed after school took cover when the tornado warning was sounded and no injuries were reported. At Creighton Prep, students and staff were herded into basements 10 minutes before the tornado hit.

James Johnson, Administrator of Bergen Mercy Hospital, described what happened just before the hospital's Self-care Center was destroyed: "We had about 25 minutes warning. That gave us time to move 425 patients from vulnerable areas to safer places."

Omaha's Public Safety Director, Richard Roth said the time the storm hit may have saved many lives. "It came at 4:30 p.m. That's going home time, but many businesses kept people in safe and secure areas. Some people wanted to go into the storm but we urged them not to and most responded," Roth said.

Stephen Lee, Public Education Officer for the City-County Civil Defense believes the appearance of a mini-tornado in southwest Omaha on March 27, of this year "scared everybody into not messing around with this kind of thing." He felt the smaller storm may have been a factor in the lifesaving response by the people on May 6.

Respond they did, properly and quickly. It was no accident. Omaha was a ready community on May 6 and that state of readiness could be traced back several years and to many people, groups, and institutions.

Much of the credit for the preparedness actions in Omaha and elsewhere

in Douglas County belong to William Noyes, Director of the City-County Civil Defense and his staff. Noyes, who has been CD Director for over 21 years has been very active in tornado safety education in the District schools and has assisted industries and small businesses with tornado safety. Through Noyes' efforts, Omaha has 44 sirens that cover about 90 percent of the city.

Noyes and his staff promoted the establishment of a special radio frequency for Civil Defense use that reaches into the local National Weather Service Office, hospitals and at nearby Eppley Field, Offutt Air Force Base, and Council Bluffs, Iowa. All National Weather Service watches and warnings and other critical storm information are broadcast on this frequency from the Communications Division Control Center. The CD Office has also established a radio system capable of tone activating muted receivers on which watch and warning information is broadcast. CD has furnished receivers for the system to schools. Many businesses and industries have also purchased

receivers. The warning alarm radio was activated during the May 6 tornado.

The backbone of an effective warning system is the tornado spotter—volunteers who assume strategic visual points during storm threats. The most effective tornado spotters are those who have radio communications, such as law enforcement agencies or amateur radio enthusiasts. Omaha had the very best. One of its amateur radio groups is called REACT, which stands for Radio Emergency Associated Citizens Team, a specially trained elite corps of storm spotters. REACT established a base station at the Omaha Weather Service Forecast Office which they man during critical periods. On May 6, they had 15 spotters out at 8 locations and had an operator at the WSFO before and during the storm.

Colonel John Tracy is Assistant Operations Officer of REACT. On May 6, he was parked on a Sarpy County hilltop about 10 miles southwest of the city limits. It was Tracy's sighting of a funnel that weighed most heavily in issuing the National Weather Service warning, the lifesaving broadcasts,

and the sounding of the sirens.

The decision to sound the sirens was made by James Schmidt, Deputy Director of Omaha's Public Safety Communications Division. He was in charge of the Communications Control Center at the time of the tornado.

Another tornado spotter group, instrumental in the effective warning system in Douglas and Sarpy County is AREC (Amateur Radio Emergency Corps). The AREC network control station, during threatening weather, is established at the Offutt Air Force Base Weather Detachment with all reports made available immediately to the Weather Service Forecast Office and the Omaha Communications Control Center.

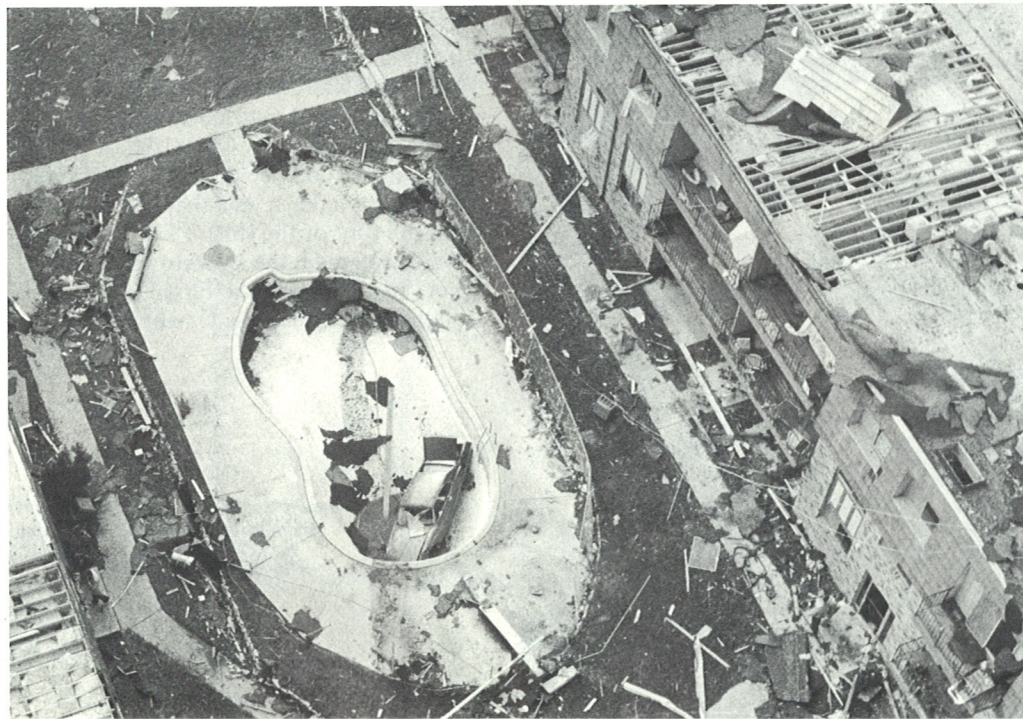
The DCPA's National Warning System (NAWAS), which connects state warning points and the National Weather Service Offices was used extensively throughout eastern Nebraska to report hail, heavy rains, and tornadoes. Warnings were also disseminated on NAWAS to various county and community warning points throughout the day.

An educated citizenry was a big factor and the newspapers—the Omaha World-Herald, Nonpareil, and the Sun Newspapers—can take a bow for the low death and injury toll. They ran tornado preparedness stories for the past several years encouraging the community to plan and repeating the basic tornado safety rules for people to follow. Radio and television stations throughout the area devoted many hours of "prime time" in the months in advance of Nebraska's storm season through interviews and showing the NOAA film, "Tornado!"

It all came together in Omaha on May 6. The watch-warning system was remarkably effective. An educated and informed public responded. Hundreds of lives were saved. It seem miraculous, but for the most part it was a man-made miracle.

*The swimming pool at an apartment complex on 84th Street was drained of water by the tornado and an auto was hurled into it.*

*(Photo: Robert Paksach-Omaha World-Herald)*



## A Chronology May 6, 1975

### CDT

12:37 p.m.

National Weather Service's Severe Storms Forecast Center at Kansas City issued a tornado watch for eastern Nebraska valid from 2:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m.

1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

REACT spotters activated their network at locations in Sarpy and Douglas County.

2:05 p.m.

Weather Service Forecast Office, Omaha, issued a severe thunderstorm warning for several counties including Sarpy and Douglas. It was based on radar reports and was transmitted to the REACT network, to broadcasters, the Communication Center, and the Police and Sheriff's Department via the NOAA Weather Wire.

3:15 p.m.

Weather Service Forecast Office issued another multi-county severe thunderstorm warning valid until 4:30 p.m. and included the Omaha metropolitan area. It was based on radar indications and reports of severe weather and hail to the south and southwest of Omaha.

4:09 p.m.

Colonel Tracy (REACT) reports spotting of tornado in Sarpy County. Several other sightings by citizens in same general area together with strong radar echoes leads to

4:14 p.m.

Tornado warning for Omaha area and 3-county area issued by Weather Service Forecast Office.

4:29 p.m.

Sirens in Omaha sounded.

4:30 p.m. to 4:35 p.m.

Several tornado reports received from REACT, AREC, Sheriff's Office, Police Division, Fire Division and the public.

4:34 p.m. to 4:43 p.m.

Captain Robert Rockwell, Fire Division, followed tornado giving location, movement, and description of damage.

4:42 p.m. to about 4:49 p.m.

Patrolman David Campbell drove along beside tornado sounding siren and reporting location, movement, and damage. Both Rockwell and Campbell gave information that was valuable in dispatching rescue units and in routing traffic.

4:58 p.m.

Tornado lifted and dissipated in Benson Park.

To honor just some of the individuals, groups, and institutions whose efforts kept the death toll down, Dr. Richard E. Hallgren, Deputy Director of the National Weather Service presented the agency's Public Service Award to:

City of Omaha, Nebraska

Douglas County, Nebraska

Omaha/Douglas County Civil Defense

Omaha Public Safety Communications Division

Omaha Police Division

Omaha Fire Division

Douglas County Sheriff's Department  
Troop A, Nebraska State Patrol

Douglas County REACT  
AK-SAR-BEN Radio Club  
Omaha World Herald  
Nonpareil

Sun Newspapers

Television Station KETV

Television Station KMTV

Television Station WOW

Radio Stations KFAB/KGOR-FM

Radio Station KGBI-FM

Radio Station KLNG

Radio Stations KOIL/KEFM-FM

Radio Stations KOOO/KOOO-FM

Radio Stations WOW/KEZO-FM

*An Omaha family tearfully re-united  
in front of their home after the storm.  
(Photo: S. J. Mellingagio-Omaha  
World-Herald)*



## Eyewitness Account

Patrolman David Campbell of the Omaha Police Division drove along beside the tornado. His siren was blowing to warn people and he gave a running account

to the Communication Center. His eyewitness account appeared in the May 7, 1975, special edition of The Omaha World-Herald and is reprinted here with its permission.

# Patrolman 'Rode With the Devil'

By James Ivey

Patrolman David Campbell rode with the devil Tuesday evening over a six-mile route that left Omaha's once-glittering Seventy-second Street Strip in mangled darkness.

It was an awesome, crackling, destructive demon that flung power poles like match sticks into the path of Campbell's battered cruiser.

Campbell is 23 and probably has a long career before him on the Police Department.

"But I'll never see anything like that again," he said at Bergan-Mercy Hospital as he helped with injured from the Tuesday tornado.

Campbell is on the C Shift, what they call the Interstate assignment — he patrols the veins and arteries of the Interstate about the city. Shortly after 4 p.m. Tuesday he was westbound on I-80 when he saw the cloud — "It seemed to be moving out of the Millard area. It was really building up by the Howard Johnson (the motel) and starting north."

On the Seventy-second Street

exit ramp, it seemed to be moving away from him. Then as he pulled out, northbound on Seventy-second Street, he met his malevolent companion.

"As I turned off the Interstate, it was right beside me ... not a hundred feet at times."

The two, the twisting, scarring finger and the man in the car, microphone in hand, started the dreadful trip up Seventy-second.

"It seemed to lose power after the motel. Then it started to build again and ripped up Seventy-second, to my left, going north. It was funny, white on the outside, I guess that was the rain, there was an awful lot of it ... And black stuff in the middle, the cone ... lumber and stuff."

It tore over a bowling alley and at Pacific Street, Campbell said, "it seemed to pick up more."

Flying debris pelted his cruiser, smashing the windows and denting the body. Campbell was still at the radio, describing the path of the tornado, dodging poles. The electricity from snapped power lines crackled

eerily about the cruiser.

"It was awful at Pacific ... The air was filled, cars were sailing about, the lines were flying ... I thought I was going to be electrocuted, the wires were swirling about ... everything lit up blue for a hundred feet around."

Ahead of him, down Seventy-second, near what he thought was Western Avenue, he could see people scurrying about and cars speeding. There were no street lights. Power poles now were flying and Campbell veered from side to side, avoiding them.

The funnel was skipping from one side of the street to the other. North it spun, the cruiser alongside, north past Blondo Street, Maple Street, crushing the land under it.

It seemed to halt, Campbell said, over the Benson Golf Course. He watched in awe for "two or three minutes."

"It just seemed to spin everything it had inside it out and then pull itself back up and disappear," he said.

Then Campbell turned back to see what the devil had done.

(Cover Photo: Bob Dunn-Ak Sar Ben Track)

